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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an explanation, justification, and invitation to establish and participate in local circuits for intercollegiate forensic tournaments. It begins by discussing the personal experience of one college forensic group in various national tournament circuits. It then presents reasons the founding of a local circuit was needed, citing the time and monetary needs of the nontraditional students who comprise the majority of the program. The paper concludes by discussing the educational value of participation in forensics programs and by stating the many benefits incurred through the establishment of a local circuit, the Great Plains Forensic Conference, which plans tournaments among several forensics programs included in this regional association. (EF)

The Road Less Traveled: Going Local

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The Road Less Traveled: Going Local

This essay is an explanation, a justification, and an invitation. Like a similar effort published in *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*¹, this paper is predicated upon the assumption that intercollegiate forensics is justified as an educational rather than a competitive activity. While intercollegiate forensics focuses on competition as a means of encouraging students toward their best effort, competition remains a means to the end rather than an end itself. Intercollegiate forensics programs are generally funded and supported by academic programs at colleges and universities. Those institutions typically serve three purposes: they educate, they research, and they provide service. Any activity supported by such institutions is legitimate only insofar as it supports those functions. I feel the program I direct can best serve the students enrolled at the university which supports the program by going local.

Explanation

I have directed the forensics program at a rather typical regional university in the south-central portion of the country for over 15 years. In that time we have been able to select from a regional CEDA circuit, a regional NPDA circuit, or a national-championship oriented individual events circuit.

¹ See: Greenstreet, R. W. (1997). Going local. *The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta*, 83:1, 37-44.

During those years, we have competed with some success on a number of different circuits. When I first arrived I inherited a program geared toward the AFA-NIET circuit. The unstated objective of the program at the time was to attempt to qualify students for the national championship tournament. Because NIET qualification is more likely if students participate in a number of tournaments, the program attempted to travel to as many tournaments as the budget would allow. Swing tournaments (two tournaments in reasonable proximity on the same weekend) were popular in this region, because they effectively doubled the opportunities for at large qualification with minimal impact on the program budget. They also provided increased exposure to forensics educator judges, enhancing student name recognition and the perception (as well as the likelihood) of contestant “with- it-ness.” Despite these advantages, swing tournaments were not without drawbacks. From an educational perspective, students had neither time nor resources to revise speeches or alter performances between tournaments. Sometimes they would be judged by the same critic in the same event at both ends of the swing, often yielding a “see previous ballot” comment. Students returned to campus late Sunday or early Monday and reported that they began their school and work weeks worn out. Students who did not do well at the first half of the swing were unlikely to fare much better in the second tournament.

Since our forensics program offers very minimal scholarship support,

we rarely recruit experienced debaters. Nearly all of the students who enroll in the Argumentation and Debate course tell me they do so to prepare to teach high school speech. To better prepare them to teach future debaters, we have offered them the opportunity to experience tournament debate. For several years CEDA debate presented the only viable means of practice. NDT tournaments were too time consuming, too far away, and did not offer novice competition. In ten years only one debate team opted to attend a second tournament (both members also participated in individual events). The overwhelming majority of students reported they did not find tournament competition in CEDA debate rewarding. They felt tournament judges either tolerated or expected behaviors which the students found uncommunicative or abusive. Students also felt they were treated as outsiders by judges and other contestants because they were newcomers and because they were not privy to local circuit tournament conventions.

When it became available we extended to our students the opportunity to try parliamentary debate. During the past five years only one student, an experienced debater who thoroughly enjoys the activity, has been interested. Other students have evinced a strong dislike for the unpredictability and artificiality of parliamentary debate. They tell me they want a chance to research the topic so they can feel confident in their analysis. They also want conventions of behavior to be more universal than they have observed during parliamentary debates they have attended. For example, they report

that every round of parliamentary debate they observe uses a different method for signaling the desire to ask a question.

Justification

Our students are not unusual, except perhaps in their persistence. Most are nontraditional females, employed at least part time, with family responsibilities. While it provides a welcome respite from their normal obligations, for most of our students tournament travel is another item to arrange in an already overbooked schedule, another demand that they arrange for child care services and workplace substitutes to cover their obligations. For them, tournament competition must be justified by its educational value. In short, the students in our forensics program must feel the reward they take from the tournament experience exceed the cost of participation.

In addition to the difficulties arranging for child care and job substitutes, the cost of entry into forensics activities includes psychological risk. Our students do not enter new situations with what Samuel Clemens described as "the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces." Even the brightest evince low self esteem, consistently underestimating the quality of their work. They are much more comfortable with situations which offer a reasonable degree of predictability, where they have some idea how they should act and some ability to prepare to discuss concepts intelligently. As adults, they do not have a high tolerance for "in your face" confrontation or

for being told there is one correct way to accomplish a task. They report that they participate in debate and individual events to become better thinkers and communicators.

Another cost which should not be overlooked is monetary. Child care is rarely free, and time spent away from work represents lost income from budgets which are likely stretched to the breaking point. While our forensics budget covers transportation, lodging, meal supplement, entry and judging fees and some equipment, participation is not free. Students with parental responsibilities often feel guilty for spending money on themselves rather than their children or their families.

Of course, time spent at tournaments is not spent on schoolwork, housework, laundry, or building relationships outside the forensics setting. For the most part, forensics participation occurs away from home. It is largely invisible to the campus community and the family. Fortunately for our students, we host a tournament each year and their families may come watch them debate, speak or interpret literature. Faculty members who judge at the tournament also come to understand the nature of the activity more fully and as a result are generally much more supportive of student participation and more tolerant of the absences it necessitates. Those who help adjudicate our contest are much more willing than those who do not to let students complete examinations and turn in assignments at alternative times or to miss a few Friday classes.

For the past five years we have gone local, abandoning almost all vestiges of national competition. Our circuit involves travel to four or five events a semester, almost all of which are within a three to four hour drive from our campus. Tournaments begin Friday afternoon and end Saturday evening. Most offer four to six preliminary rounds, semifinals and finals in debate and two preliminary rounds and finals in seven individual events. Several of the tournaments we attend do not offer elimination rounds in debate, opting instead to power match competition (winning teams meet other winning teams while losing teams meet other losing teams). Regardless of the size of the entry, team debate always offers a novice division. At least half of the judges, often almost all the judges, are not speech or debate educators. Judges may vote against a debate team for being rude or abusive, and if both teams engage in such practices the judge need not vote for either (both teams may lose). We affiliated (indeed some of us founded) a national organization focused on the educational rather than the competitive value of debate, but when that organization appeared disinterested in meeting our needs, we formed our own regional association. We now participate in the Great Plains Forensic Conference.

Invitation

I feel going local has improved the educational value of participation in intercollegiate forensics for our students. We have more participants now than we have had in a decade. The reason our program has been revitalized

is that students feel they are learning something worthwhile through participation in forensics. They find tournaments much more civil than anticipated, especially students who have had some high school tournament exposure. Debate has become a pleasant experience most of the time (yes, even on our circuit debaters sometimes go “over the top”). Judges write ballot comments about the content of speeches and the value of oral interpretation selections as well as the nature of the contestants’ delivery. Our students come back from tournament trips energized, eager to work through the problems they encountered during the weekend. They want to develop their analysis of the debate topic area, to explore the new sources they heard quoted by their opponents and to research topic areas they had not anticipated.

Going local has done wonders for the level and amount of intercollegiate forensics competition in the state. From about six active programs (two or more tournament a year) 10 years ago, the state now has about 13 colleges and universities sponsoring programs. New program directors are likely to be mentored by those who have participated in the inception of our circuit. We help each other administer tournaments. We support each other by hosting and attending tournaments. We work together to iron out differences about rules, ethical standards, tournament administration procedures, and a host of other details large and small.

Going local has also revitalized our local judging pool. No longer must

we beg for debate judges--or at least we do not have to beg as hard. Every time we host a debate event one or two new judges who have heard from others how much fun it is to hear college students engaged in reasoned discourse pick up ballots. Former judges report how much better (more communicative, more rational, less counterintuitive, more civil) they feel the debates are than those they heard a decade ago. Colleagues on campus now list the intercollegiate forensics program among our campus successes.

Conclusion

Directing an intercollegiate forensics program is not an easy road to travel. Chasing national championships requires such an expenditure of energy that unless others in the department or graduate assistants share the burden, the program director is unlikely to establish a research agenda or to publish meaningful scholarship. Teaching is likely to suffer, as innovation is likely to be directed toward coaching. Collegial relationships on campus are likely to take a back seat to those established on the competitive circuit. Competitive success at the national championship level requires the program to be represented at important events from coast to coast both to establish name recognition and to establish competitive success against other programs. The investment of institutional resources is enormous, and pales in comparison to the investment of personal commitment which requires program directors to become less visible on campus and at home.

I started down that road almost a quarter century ago. I got far enough

down the path to rank programs in the top 20 in CEDA's final national ranking and at AFA-NIET, far enough to coach champions at regional tournaments and national finalists. I traveled far enough to feel disconnected from my wife and daughter, to become estranged from the department where I was employed. Gradually, over a period of years it became obvious to me that the direction in which I was headed did not lead to a destination I found attractive.

I became a forensics director for two reasons: to give back to the field some of what I had taken from it, and to make it possible for students to gain some of what I had gained. For better or worse, forensics forever altered the direction of my life. Going local allows me to provide a potentially life-altering experience for more of our students than I ever could by pursuing national championships. If I taught at a university with a substantial scholarship, travel, and equipment/technology budget, graduate student or faculty assistant support, three quarter- or half-load reduction, a full time secretary and traditional aged students whose main commitment in life was intercollegiate forensics, pursuing national championships might be appropriate. That is not where I teach, nor where most of my professional colleagues teach. That is not where my students seek baccalaureate degrees. For my students, my colleagues, and me, going local makes sense.



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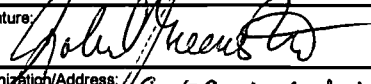


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